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The Devil's in the Details

A Characterization of Montresor in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"

Audrey Saxton

Written in 1846, "The Cask of Amontillado" remains one of Edgar Allan Poe's most gruesome revenge tales. Critics often examine Montresor's motive for murder and read him as a braggart; but while "Amontillado" does depict a morbid murder, other critics emphasize the religious imagery present throughout this tale which depicts the allegorical struggle between Christ and Satan. However, other critics find allegorical readings of Poe problematic since Poe often voiced his dislike for allegorical writing. In an essay criticizing Nathaniel Hawthorne's work, Poe wrote, "In defense of allegory . . . there is scarcely one respectable word to be said" (254). Although Poe disliked allegory in general, he was not against all forms of allegorical writing. Poe continues in his essay on Hawthorne that he does not mind "allegory properly handled" which, according to Poe, is allegory "judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses" (254). In "Amontillado" Poe's use of allegory is subtle, a shadow that approaches truth rather than a horn that blasts out a moral.

Many critics have been prompted to read this short story as an allegory because of the biblical image represented by Montresor's family crest: a human foot crushing the head of a serpent. Within the context of the family crest, critics have read Montresor as representing both

the human foot, or the Christ-figure, as well as the serpent, or the devil. Donald Pearce's essay written in 1954 characterizes Montresor as strictly Mephistophelean, or devilish, and reads Fortunato as a re-enactment of the passion of Christ. However, Philip M. Pittman disagrees with Pearce's reading in his essay "Method and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado'" saying that if Montresor is the serpent, then Satan triumphs. To right this wrong, Pittman reads "Fortunato as the Mephistophelean figure, and Montresor as playing out a role in which he extracts a fully Christian retribution" (95).

These two readings demonstrate a major conflict that exists in criticism surrounding this short story: if "Amontillado" is a Christian allegory, does Montresor represent the Christ figure or the devil, and what are the consequences of such a reading? Based on a close examination of the text, it is more likely that Montresor aligns with the serpent depicted on the family crest, and thus represents the devil in this eternal struggle between good and evil. However, because critics have read Montresor and Fortunato as representations of both sides of the conflict, the criticism hints at another major element: Montresor's and Fortunato's role as doubles. Because Montresor and Fortunato are doubles, readers view Montresor in a sympathetic light which creates a less rigid division between good and evil. Their relationship as doubles further complicates Montresor's vengeful and Satan-like character, providing a compelling look into the contradictions and ambiguities of human nature.

In the allegorical reading of this text, Montresor's family crest is the central image that depicts the struggle between good and evil and each character's role within the conflict. Poe describes the crest as "a huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (1259). The foot d'or, or the golden foot, is a fitting symbol for the prosperous Fortunato since Poe describes him as "rich, respected, admired, beloved; [and] happy" (1259). The serpent represents Montresor; snakes are the ultimate symbol of revenge, biting back at those who cause them harm and thus swiftly progressing from the victim to the perpetrator. And so, even as Fortunato crushes Montresor's dignity and pride with "a thousand injuries" and the singular "insult" (1256), Montresor turns around and imbeds his fangs into the foot of Fortunato. Poe could not have picked a greater symbol to represent a man obsessed and consumed by revenge than nature's greatest avenger—the serpent.

But besides revenge, the serpent has another equally important symbolic meaning. Most readers, especially Poe's western audience, widely recognize snakes as symbols of the devil due to the serpent's role in the biblical account of Adam and Eve. Thus, Montresor comes to represent the devil through his connection to the snake depicted in the family crest.

Many critics, including Pearce and Pittman, have read the crest in conjunction with the biblical tradition found in Genesis chapter thirteen, which more fully connects the crest to the allegorical struggle between good and evil. In the description of the crest, Poe's specific use of the word "serpent" rather than snake creates a direct link between the crest and these bible verses. Genesis chapter three reads: "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed [. . .] And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (*King James Version*, Gen. 3.14-15). Katherine M. Harris, another Poe scholar, observes about these verses that "this is not an image of impartial revenge, but the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil" (333). The crest clearly shows Fortunato, the foot and "Church militant," crushing the snake with "a thousand injuries" (Poe, "Amontillado" 1256) and triumphing. Montresor's description of the "thousand injuries" should not be taken literally, but is rather a hyperbole that suggests the injuries of Fortunato are innumerable. With this understanding, the "thousand injuries" create connotations of continued action and repeated bruising. However, Genesis reads "[the foot] shall bruise thy head, and [the serpent] shall bruise his heel." Thus the crest depicts not only "the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil," as Harris writes, but also the forces of evil retaliating. After Fortunato crushes Montresor, Montresor embeds his fangs into Fortunato; the fangs are lodged deep and fixed fast into the heel with little chance of removing them. With these characteristics, the crest provides the reader with an image of Fortunato the foot and Montresor the serpent locked in a cycle of bruising—a clear image of the perpetual struggle between good and evil.

But while the crest may show continual retaliation, Montresor only commits one act of vengeance. This single act breaks the cycle and ultimately upsets the balance between good and evil. Montresor's first words to his audience read, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I

had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (1256). The crest shows continual action: the foot stomps, the snake bites, and the cycle continues. However, Montresor has borne each bruise from Fortunato without vengeful actions so far; in other words, Montresor has not once bitten Fortunato back for any of the “thousand injuries.” When Montresor decides to bite back, he does not want to simply bruise Fortunato, he wants revenge. The Genesis verses show continual retaliation, but each act of retaliation is equal: a bruise for a bruise—no more, no less. Revenge, however, is not a retaliation of equal action, but a promise to commit an action that creates greater suffering than the suffering inflicted upon the seeker of revenge. Therefore, by vowing revenge, Montresor has vowed not to repay Fortunato for the bruises, but to murder him, an act far worse than any of the bruises inflicted by Fortunato. Montresor’s action will upset the balance and end the struggle between the images of the snake and the foot by removing the heel permanently.

Montresor’s family crest is a central image which allows critics to read “Amontillado” as an allegorical story. However, while Donald Pearce’s essay does briefly deal with Montresor’s family crest, he does not place nearly enough emphasis on the crest’s importance in characterizing Montresor as Mephistophelean. Pearce writes, “[Montresor’s] coat of arms (doubtless invented on the spot) contains a human foot being bruised at the heel by a satanic serpent” (449). Pearce does recognize the importance of the biblical allusion. He describes the crest’s snake as “satanic” and even includes the Genesis verses in a later parenthetical statement. But by dismissing the crest as an invention of the moment, whether by Poe or by Montresor, Pearce undermines the role the crest plays in depicting each character—and more importantly in setting up the entire story to be a conflict between good and evil. It seems odd that Pearce would ignore the essential allegorical image of the crest when he believes the story to be more than just a systematic symbolization. Pearce writes, “The elements of the scriptural parody wind through the tale demonically, as the mottled striations in a slab of black marble, suggesting powerful but indeterminate patterns that have a mythic feel” (449). Pearce’s observation is right on one account, Poe has set up details and elements of “Amontillado” that create a mythical feel, but because Pearce claims that these patterns are “indeterminate,” it is impossible to

determine to what myth Pearce is referring. Contrary to what Pearce says, these patterns are not indeterminate. Through a careful examination of the details such as the family crest and Montresor's character, readers can trace these patterns back to a specific myth, one of the most influential and foundational myths of humanity, the battle between good and evil.

Montresor is the vengeful, satanic snake and Fortunato the foolish, prosperous foot; but many critics have also very successfully interpreted Montresor's crest in the opposite manner. Pearce was one of the first critics to see the connection between Montresor and the devil, and others, such as Jay Jacoby and Thomas Pribek, support this reading. However, Graham St. John Stott, who reads "Amontillado" as "an exploration of the darkness in the heart of Calvinism's God," writes, "if Montresor is God's agent [. . .], then he is not the serpent but the figure whose heel bruises the serpent's head—in the Christian tradition, Christ" (85). In his reading, Stott not only aligns Montresor with the foot, but he also asserts a reading in opposition to Pearce's, instead declaring Montresor the Christ figure.

These opposing interpretations of the crest and its effects on Montresor's and Fortunato's characters present readers with an ambiguous crest. However, rather than creating an unclear reading of Montresor's character, the ambiguous crest strengthens Montresor's connection to the devil. The devil thrives on uncertainty; he makes morals seem ambiguous and undefined. Also, at times, Montresor seems like a Christ figure, a reading supported by Philip Pittman and other critics who see Montresor as the foot. Since the beginning of time, the devil has been enticing humans to trust him by pretending to be good or Christ-like. For example, in Second Corinthians Paul warns the people that Satan can appear as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11.14). Poe has successfully created a devilish character that confuses readers and critics alike. Critics cannot characterize Montresor by just one of the crest's images, and readers can find an abundance of textual evidence to support Montresor's role as both a devil and a Christ figure. Thus, by creating Montresor's crest as an ambiguous image, with uncertainty being the devil's primary tool, Poe further aligns Montresor's vengeful soul with the devil.

In addition to strengthening Montresor's connection to the devil, the ambiguous crest also cues readers to view "Amontillado" as a story of doubling. The ambiguous nature of the crest sets up a situation in which

the characters could embody either image of the crest. At particular times during the story, readers can clearly see Montresor's link with the serpent. At other times, they can clearly see Montresor's link with the heel. And while this strengthens Montresor's devilish identity, it also complicates Montresor's character by providing him with a link to both sides of the biblical conflict. Likewise, because Montresor and Fortunato are doubles, Fortunato is not simply the prosperous heel. Pittman's essay provides excellent evidence to show that this story depicts Fortunato as a devilish character complete with a prideful heart and flashing eyes (329). This reversal of roles creates a fluid relationship between the characterizations of both Montresor and Fortunato, the images on the crest, and these images' allegorical counterparts—the forces of good and evil.

Poe establishes the doubling between Montresor and Fortunato through a jumble of echoing and re-echoing, which reveals Montresor's complex character to the reader. The most prominent example of doubling appears towards the end of the text when Montresor echoes Fortunato's "loud and shrill screams" (Poe 1262). Montresor says, "I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed—I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still" (Poe 1262). Amidst the rattling chains and the contending "shrill screams," Poe creates an image of the supernatural, even of hell. Fortunato's screams are the screams of a damned soul, and Montresor echoes Fortunato's screams because he, too, is a damned soul. In this instance, Montresor moves away from strictly the serpent side of the allegory and reveals a very human emotion: remorse. Montresor cries out in agony as he laments assuming the identity of nature's avenger (the snake) and following in the footsteps of the devil. Fortunato's screams echo—or double—Montresor's soul. However, Montresor's screams "surpassed [Fortunato's] in volume and strength" indicating that Montresor suffers the worse fate, a fate more potent and lasting than Fortunato's suffocation. One could even say Montresor suffers from a guilty conscience as he bemoans not the act he has committed against Fortunato, but the fate he has ascribed to himself. Because readers do not typically associate the devil with guilt and remorse, Montresor moves away from the snake and becomes the heel, a more human and sympathetic character.

The text further reveals Montresor's human-like character through his actions; Montresor may tell the reader that murdering Fortunato, or ending the heel, is the outcome he wants, but his actions reveal

his true desires. While Montresor's act of echoing Fortunato's cries provides evidence that Montresor and Fortunato are doubles, it also foreshadows Montresor's final wishes. Montresor wants to "echo" the injuries of Fortunato with more strength and volume, ultimately causing Fortunato to grow "still" or silent and end the struggle between good and evil. However, the final brick presents readers with another story. Poe writes, "There remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled under its weight" (1262). This last brick represents the weight of Montresor's actions. If Montresor truly wanted to complete this murder and remove the foot entirely, he would have rushed to place the final brick and to finish the task with excitement and zeal, just as he builds "the second tier, and the third, and the fourth" (Poe 1262) in quick succession and with no difficulty. Additionally, Montresor says, "I forced the last stone into its position" (Poe 1263). The text offers no evidence to suggest that the other bricks were hard to fit together, indicating that Montresor had to force himself to place the final brick, which would complete his revenge and end the allegorical conflict.

Yet despite this hesitation, the reader does not doubt that Montresor enjoys watching Fortunato suffer. Montresor even says, "during [the furious vibrations of the chain], that I might hearken to it with more satisfaction, I ceased my labors" (Poe 1262). In this instance, Montresor stops working in order to gain pleasure from Fortunato's suffering. But causing the heel to suffer is only a bruise, not an act of revenge. The text clearly shows that finishing the wall, or completing the murder, makes Montresor uneasy. He "hesitated [and] trembled" (Poe 1262); his "heart grew sick" (Poe 1263). These are not the actions of a stone-cold killer and a selfish demon, but the actions of a selfish man fearing the fate of his own soul. Montresor's actions during Fortunato's final moments make Montresor more human and not as intimately linked to the devil as before.

Montresor's and Fortunato's last exchange presents the reader with the next, and final, case of doubling. Montresor echoes Fortunato: "'Let us be gone.' 'Yes,' I said, 'Let us be gone.' 'For the love of God, Montresor!' 'Yes,' I said, 'for the love of God!'" (Poe 1263). Devoid of his murderous zeal, Montresor can only echo back Fortunato's pleas. Montresor's hesitations reveal his true desires: to be saved from this pain and torment, to not kill Fortunato, to maintain the balance between good and evil. But since his connection with the devil overpowers these other wishes, Montresor

cannot reverse his actions and this reduces him to an echo. And just as an echo resonates and lingers, Montresor's suffering also resonates and lingers long after Fortunato suffocates. Indeed, with the final words, "in pace requiescat" (Poe 1263), Montresor issues forth a plea for the removal of his own suffering so that he can finally "rest in peace."

While still a horrific revenge tale, Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" takes on new complexity when examined in light of the Montresor family crest's allegorical imagery. This imagery shows Montresor's alignment with the devil, the ancient and biblical struggle between good and evil, and the story's ambiguous interpretation. Although "Amontillado" presents readers with a story in which Montresor's evil act triumphs over good, by the end of the tale, Montresor is not just another selfish devil. Through doubling, Montresor's character has evolved; he does not want to destroy Fortunato entirely. Poe's presentation of a remorseful and very human-like devil gives a new twist to the timeless struggle which begins to break down the boundaries between who is good and who is evil. The ambiguous relationship that Poe creates between good and evil, just like the relationship he establishes between the images of the crest and the characters, shows readers that Montresor's character is also ambiguous and ultimately undefinable. Perhaps it is this message, rather than Fortunato's murder, which characterizes "The Cask of Amontillado" as one of Poe's most gruesome tales.

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